SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS Then and Now 1926-1966

(A talk given to Women Associates of Sir George Williams University - May 4, 1960)

by Wynne Francis

It seems incredible that as little as thirty-five years ago, Sir George Williams did not exist, either as university or college. In 1925, certain members of the Montreal YMCA became convinced that they should extend their already existing educational activities to meet the need of the growing population of this city for higher education in English. And in 1926 a formal teaching program of evening studies was designated as Sir George Williams College and made co-educational. By 1929, Faculty organization in Arts, Science and Commerce was begun. As late as 1932, Day courses were added, though Faculty organization of a four-year course was not yet complete. In 1936, the first Bachelor Degrees were awarded -- both of them!

The next ten years -- from 1936 to 1946 -- were very exciting. Under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Kenneth Norris, the College program, flexible and experimental in nature, was designed to meet the needs of the student body. That student body was still very largely in the Evening Division and during those years, especially, that is where the chief emphasis, stimulation and enthusiasm of the institution were to be found. It was during those years that we carved a place for ourselves as a College -- for by offering evening courses for credit we not only pioneered in a new development in North America but also made a unique contribution to Canadian Education.

To do this required faith, tenacity and courage. On the one hand we had the task of persuading older and more traditional institutions of higher learning to take us and our graduates seriously -- and on the other hand we had the problem of educating the public to the fact of our existence. It was no easy matter to explain to the people of Montreal that Sir George Williams College was not just another department of the Y.M.C.A. where you could "take up short story writing, folk-dancing or handicrafts".

Internally, we felt we knew what we were about. We were offering general education aimed primarily to satisfy the needs of people to whom, for one reason or another, the usual university experience had been denied. (Let me read you what Assistant Dean Ernest Stabler had to say of this about that time. Georgian Faculty Review, April 1948.)

We did capture and maintain the confidence of our peers and of the public. In a phenomenally short time our graduates were being received into scores of post graduate schools across the country, and the people of Montreal so fully recognized our identity that they flocked to us in embarrassing numbers. What was accomplished in those years is largely attributable to the inspired leadership of Principal Norris and Dean Henry F. Hall and their associates, including Professor C. W. Thompson, Douglass Burns Clarke, Ted Sheffield and Ernest Stabler, all of whom shared an idealism and an enthusiasm which is hard to match. The staff of the College, too, attracted fine men who stayed, certainly not for the money or for prestige, but because they had caught something of the fire and sense of dedication abroad in those days. The students, too, shared the zeal and sense of dedication, and it is partly through their personal efforts that the barriers of both academic prejudice and public ignorance were broken down.

The decade that followed, from 1946 to 1956, continued to be exciting in different ways. Nineteen forty-eight saw the acquisition of our Charter, and subsequently our admission to membership in the National Council of Canadian Universities. Our Day Division grew considerably during those years, first by the influx of Veterans, and then through more normal causes. We found it necessary to acquire more and more space for library, labs, classrooms. We overflowed our premises in the "Y" Building and took whatever we could get in the surrounding edifices. And what a motely clutter of annexes we existed in for several years! -- The Salvation Army Hall on a rental basis, several converted rooms over a photographers store on Drummond, the Synagogue, converted to labs and classrooms on Stanley Street ..... And then, at long last, the

fabulous New Building! By this time we had lost the atmosphere and many of the desirable attributes of the "small college" -- an educational ideal which we relinquished with some reluctance. We had, upon joining the NCCU, grudgingly given up the description of our offerings as one Faculty of Arts, Science and Commerce in favour of the term "The Faculties" of etc. In practice, we somewhat stubbornly clung to the original idea as having the merit of supporting our belief in "general education". And we hoped, perhaps, to stave off, for a while, the inevitable decentralization required by our growing numbers. We have not stemmed the tide, of course, despite recent measures to curtail registration (in the Day Division for example) and the result is that Departmentalization (which used to be regarded as a nasty word at Sir George) must soon be implemented to some degree if complete confusion and disorder ~~is~~ are to be avoided. It may be, indeed, that decentralization, carefully planned, can help us reclaim some of the personal relationships and sense of belonging which our present size and cumbercome organization discourage.

During the past four years, Sir George has been subjected to many pressures from within and without. In combination, the effect of these pressures has been to challenge seriously the very nature of our institution and to cause us much consternation as to the direction in which we should move. Let us briefly look at some of the developments which, culminating in our recent change of name, pose the inescapable question for us, "Where do we go from here?"

Internally, it became obvious almost on the day of occupation that the New Building was not large enough. By virtue of our own established reputation, we have been attracting students in larger numbers than we can accommodate in terms of space, equipment and staff. Added to this is the threat of the so-called population bulge of young people who will be of college age come the mid-sixties. Our present New Building is ludicrously inadequate to cope with this. Clearly,

physical expansion seems immanent. But the where and how of it pose some thorny questions which strike at the very nature of the institution. Shall we, who have clung to our mid-town site in the belief that we can here best serve our evening students, now move out to the suburbs? (Recent analysis of the work-locations of our evening students seems to indicate that this is not an impractical idea, as it was once thought to be.) Or shall we, giving up all pretense in regard to the "one-faculty" idea, split now into the different faculties establishing each in a separate building? Or shall we dissociate the Day and Evening divisions? There are many and varied proposals in the air these days; but of each we must ask -- How will such a move further our educational mission? How will it affect administration? Is it financially possible? How will it affect our relationship with our parent body, the Y.M.C.A.? Such questions, I submit, are not easily answered.

But the physical problem is only one aspect of the internal pressure I have mentioned. Curriculum wise, over the past five years, particularly with the growth of the Day Division, more and more interest is being shown by students and staff alike in Majoring programs, in the stiffening of Entrance Requirements and of Course Standards. Concern with prerequisites, the establishment of B level course requirements, the growing impatience with the problems of partial students, and recently the virtual abolishment of pandemics (once hallowed courses at Sir George), all are signs pointing away from the flexible, experimental general educational ideal and towards the more rigid traditional academic pattern. Even Honour courses, research programs, and post-graduate studies are now being discussed among students and staff as desirable possibilities for the future. Those most interested in such developments look chiefly to the ~~development~~ Expansion of the Day Division. And there are perhaps good reasons why this should be. Statisticians tell us that the number of applicants for entrance to Day College will swell, within the next fifteen years, to proportions demanding facilities far beyond what

the existing Canadian universities can provide. This being so, deliberate expansion of our Day College would seem to be a logical step.

External pressures, too, some global, some local in import, have had their effect. During the early 50's most of the major educational institutions of the world were engaged to some degree in post-war stock-taking. This involved some revamping of curricula, extension of facilities, re-assessment of teaching techniques, and so on. But most certainly, this normal leisurely tinkering was galvanized into frenetic activity with the launching of Sputnik I by Russia. Overnight, the Western World seemed to realize the tremendous importance of education, the "right kind" of education -- education that would put us on a par with, no, more, a jump at least ahead of Russia, scientifically and technologically.

Suddenly, it appeared to many Western educators that we had been shamefully wasting our students' time. All the fringe benefits and frills of American education became suspect. Science must be made the hard core of the curriculum! Standards must be raised, discipline ensured, excellence demanded! What's wrong with the way we're teaching maths? We need more and bigger and better labs! The excitement grew, with comparisons of Russian and Western education at every level, arguments about where the proper emphasis should be in the curriculum, about the best teaching methods, about the selection of students ~~about~~, etc., etc.

Repercussions of all this were naturally felt in Canada. The Canadian people as a whole were alerted to the importance of their Universities. And this interest coincided with the Federal Government's decision to extend financial aid to accredited universities across the country.

We at Sir George drew a satisfied sigh that we were by now <u>well-established</u> and would therefore soon have a share of the assistance. Then came the reaction of the Government of the Province of Quebec to delay the distribution of monies. Two years of dickering publicly over the question of provincial autonomy in this matter served at least to keep the spotlight on university education. And there, in

centre stage, side by side with the five other established Quebec Universities, stood Sir George Williams College. College! Not a university. Nonsense, we have a charter to operate as a university. Then why call ourselves a college? Is there a difference? Is there a difference, a confusion, in the minds of the public? What's in a name? Well, perhaps the time is appropriate. A change of name will dispel any lingering doubts as to our status. And so, through the legitimate channels, we became at a most opportune time, Sir George Williams University.

What's in a name? A mysterious kind of magic, really, just as our forefathers believed. Somehow, in our case, the name change brought sharply into focus all the pressures, tendencies, tensions, paradoxes, contradictions and inconsistencies that have been growing within our institution.

Today, on the brink of unprecedented expansion, we must pause and ask some serious questions of ourselves.

Just what are we? What is a university? If there are many kinds of universities which kind are we? Did we not start out with the pioneering, experimental zest for doing something unique? And do we not, now, only twenty-five years later, find ourselves edging closer and closer to the traditional century-hallowed patterns of academic life? Is it just that, as in the normal history of any institution, once having satisfied the drive for status, we are now settling into the mold of conformity?

Is it not significant that the people who regard themselves as having the future of Sir George at heart now find the very terms "pioneer" and "experimental" somewhat embarrassing. And how many resent being reminded that our founding father, whose name we bear, had at heart, not the producing of a scholarly elite but the welfare of the young men of the drapery trade? Well, but times have changed, and we must change with the times. Is it so important to be unique and experimental? Surely there is great merit in the traditional educational pattern?

If serving the public is what we hope to do, surely we can serve them best by remoulding our institutions closer to the form of their present need.

Yes, we may well pause and ask what's in a name? What does our name stand for? Where do we go from here? It is time we examined our premises, clarified or revised our philosophy of education and set ourselves firmly in the direction we wish to go. Otherwise, my fear (and there are those who share that fear) is that in gaining a name, we may lose our identity. It is all too easy to become a third-rate imitation of the traditional institution. Let us hope we will find a way, and the courage, to put fresh, distinctive, and meritorious meaning into the name Sir George Williams University.

(cf also - last paragraph of the Principal's Fourth Annual Report - Feb? '60)